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Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China

Liu Kang

Popular culture is perhaps the best place to test the claim that “(capitalist) globalization is now an accepted reality,” as the new world-space of cultural production and representation is inhabited by images and goods pertaining to the everyday life of the world population, that is, by images and goods that are manufactured by multinational corporations and circulated in a global market. China, the emergent economic giant of the 1990s, has caught on to the latest global cultural production and marketing trends at an astonishing pace. “Get on line!” for instance, is a popular catchphrase among the millions of Chinese whiz kids who use the Internet. Such a rapid change defies the imagination not only of its Western analysts but also of die-hard Chinese ideologues of Western-style modernization and liberal democracy who were exiled overseas in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen event and whose goals are purportedly nothing less than a prosperous, market-oriented economy and social plurality. Journalists, the proper “postmodern culture workers,” on the other hand, have no time to

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ponder the probability of China's transformation. Two examples may help illustrate both the extent to which China is now assimilated into the global popular culture market and the character of its native and local peculiarities and legacies.

The first example, headlined "Wind of Christmas Sweeping Shanghai: Money Oriented," is based on a Reuters news report and comes from the 16 December 1996 issue of *China News Digest*, an Internet publication:

Holiday commercial promotions in Shanghai department stores started earlier than ever this year, expecting a major kick-off with Christmas shopping season. . . . The stores, especially the joint-venture ones, are working hard to promote the idea of Christmas as a gift-sharing holiday among the young people in their 20s. Christmas decorations, trees, and cards can be seen everywhere in the stores. Some stores give out a ten percent gift certificate for every 500 yuan spent in the store to encourage spending. One young salesman told the reporter that he planned to spend 500 yuan on Christmas gifts and cards for friends. According to him, "we young people in Shanghai like to copy Western habits." The traditional holiday shopping season in China is during January and February before the Chinese New Year, which is still the case to most old people in Shanghai. Some stores reported a drastic rise in sales, ranging from 50–100% in December as compared with the sales volume in November, with Christmas as the contributing factor. However, as one salesman said, "There is no religious feeling. It is just commercial."¹

Except for the reference to the Chinese New Year, which adds local flavor, the report is nearly identical to *U.S. News and World Report's* account of the 1996 Christmas season in America. "Imagine a purer, less commercial, more spiritual Christmas," we are told, "but don't call it history." It is "more a product of our cultural imagination than of historical fact." Although many Americans now complain that Christmas has become too commercial (about 48 percent polled by *U.S. News and World Report* say gift giving detracts from the religious celebration), the holiday is still in essence "a grand festival of consumption."²

1. Wu Fang and Ray Zhang, "Wind of Christmas Sweeping Shanghai: Money Oriented," *China News Digest* (16 Dec. 1996), <http://www.cnd.org:8009/CND-Global/CND-Global.96.4th/CND-Global.96-12-15.html>.

2. Jeffery Sheler, "In Search of Christmas," *U.S. News and World Report*, 23 December 1996, 56, 58, 62.

Amid the commercial blitz raging throughout China, there are not many different stories to tell, yet the ways in which these stories are told vary considerably. The second example I will cite is taken from Chinese reportage literature, a nonfiction genre popular in China since the 1930s known for its poignant exposure of social ills and its penchant for inciting political sentiment. “‘Armchairs’ of the Summer Palace” relates the story of the construction of Nandaihe, a new beach resort, in the 1990s. The new resort is located next to Beidaihe, the well-known beach resort near Beijing that has served as the virtual summer palace for China’s top political leaders since Mao’s days, a place where many historically significant meetings that have changed China’s course have been held. The new resort capitalizes on the political fame of its neighbor as it rushes to gain the advantage in the “third industry,” namely, the service, sales, entertainment, and tourist industries. For the authors of this piece, and perhaps for the builders of the new resort as well, the construction of a tourist attraction is as much a noble political task as it is a great commercial adventure, and hence, we are led to see the scene as imbued with a passion and a zeal that is matched only by the revolutionary wars of Mao’s era, in which military metaphors dominated every aspect of Chinese discourse and the cultural imaginary, from harvesting rice crops to giving birth:

The Funing County Party Committee assigned Vice Party Secretary Hou, Vice County Governor Chen, and Director of the County Tourism Bureau Nie to be in charge of the construction project. Because of Secretary Hou’s authority and popularity throughout the county, he coordinated efforts and ironed out troubles, making way for the smooth daily progress of the construction. Thus, a collective of passionate fighting spirit was formed. Confronting all kinds of interferences, they resolutely fought on, day and night, at the construction site. Yes, it’s a battle, it’s determination and will, it’s pathos, it’s rhythm and tempo, and it’s dedication and adventurousness—there was nothing but the fiercest fighting on the battleground.³

The above passages report real events, and yet the texture of their discourse bears a certain effect of unreality, a sense of displacement or disjuncture, caused not so much by the events reported as by the discourse used in the reporting. When reading the first passage, one has the feeling that Christmas Eve in Shanghai in 1996 is no different from Christmas Eve

3. Yi He and Li Zongpu, “Xiadu pang de ‘quanyi’” (“Armchairs” of the summer palace), *Zhongguo zuojia* (Chinese writers) 4 (1996): 145.

in New York City; both cities are ablaze with the same desires and anxieties of the shopping spree. Its decontextualized composition results in a postmodern leveling off of differences. The second passage, in its overall seriousness, cannot be construed as a parody/travesty of bygone revolutionary discourse but must be grasped instead as something radically *other* than itself: the collective “fighting spirit” of Mao’s era is transposed into an altogether unfamiliar locus whereby global capital celebrates its success hand-in-hand with the revolutionary soldiers-turned-managers.

To call this postmodern would probably not be off the mark. It seems certain that in China’s popular culture arena, the infiltration of global cultural production (read Western capitalist commercial culture) is accelerated by historical reappropriations and displacements of older structures in the service of a qualitatively very different situation. However, the hybridity of those reappropriated, displaced, and heterogeneous segments that constitute the popular culture scene in China raises serious questions about the critical concepts and interpretive strategies available to us now. In what follows, I intend to address the correlation between and the contradictions in the practices and theories of commercial popular culture and the revolutionary culture of the masses. I begin by underscoring the political nature of popular culture and its interpretation. This is not simply to state the obvious once again; I want to argue that the very meaning of politics has undergone significant metamorphoses in this case. It is the practical and theoretical legacy of *qunzhong wenyi* (the culture of the masses) that needs to be reexamined as the radical *other* of China’s popular culture. *Qunzhong wenyi*, a legacy of the revolutionary past and an essential component of the revolutionary hegemony, cannot be dismissed as merely residual and irrelevant today. Its aesthetic forms and structures are deeply ingrained in the Chinese cultural imaginary, constituting a significant dimension in the contradiction-ridden cultural arena. To understand this vibrant legacy in China today, one may view it against a complex set of historical practices and conceptual codes that addresses issues of both revolution and culture. I refer specifically to two critical models, namely the Frankfurt school’s theory of mass culture and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Furthermore, as the world-system of capitalism and globalization has inevitably shaped the reality of the world, at least in the realm of popular culture, postmodernity as a style of culture seems to have a universal appeal. Yet, to describe China’s culture as postmodern tells only a half-truth, for the radical *other* of the postmodern global imaginary, namely the local, cannot be left unacknowledged. The local, as opposed to the global, in the present context may

first refer to the geopolitical and cultural specificities of China, but it then may have to be narrowed to the more specific, to the more concrete social practices of particular locations and temporalities within China. Ultimately, the global postmodern has to return to the most fundamental question of the everyday. The everyday is not only both global and local (in the sense that it must encompass different temporalities, subjectivities, spaces, and public spheres); it may also serve as a site that unravels and critiques the contradictions and fallacies of the age. The following account of the contradictions in China's popular culture is by no means comprehensive; it only suggests the complexities of the overall contradictions in China's modernization process during the recent past.

The Politics of Popular Culture in China Today

One can discuss politics in the present Chinese context from at least three perspectives: (1) from the classical perspective of political economy; (2) from the perspective that the political and ideological struggles that have taken place in the cultural arena are part and parcel of Chinese tradition; and (3) from the perspective that politics today is a new configuration that has yet to be worked out—a “postpolitics” of some sort—which may address China's changing political functions and structures. Politics in the first two senses, however, is hardly straightforward. In an article entitled “China's Challenge to the United States and to the Earth,” Lester Brown and Christopher Flavin claim that “as [China's] population of 1.2 billion people moves into modern houses, buys cars, refrigerators, and televisions, and shifts to a meat-based diet, the entire world will feel the effects.”⁴ The rapid marketization of the economy, bolstered by the enormous absorption of foreign investment and China's linking with the capitalist world-system (or, in Chinese idiom, *yu guoji jiegui* [joining the international track]), has significantly transformed Chinese social life. Its effect can be felt mostly at the level of everyday life, as Western consumer culture, or popular culture, has infiltrated the world's largest marketplace.

The effect of marketization on China's politics cannot be underestimated, especially at the grassroots level and in everyday life. However, China's politics, as portrayed by the mainstream Western media in headline

4. Lester Brown and Christopher Flavin, “China's Challenge to the United States and to the Earth,” *World Watch*, September/October 1996, 10. The magazine is published by the U.S. environmental watchdog organization World Watch Institute in Washington, D.C.

news, has always assumed the familiar scenario of age-old ideological and political dissent and suppression. Such cold war horror stories of communist persecution and human rights violations are validated and substantiated by academic China specialists and native informants/dissidents, and are then circulated and finally regurgitated at the negotiation table, where officials from the U.S. State Department or the U.S. Department of Commerce and their Chinese counterparts use such tales as bargaining chips in matters such as (de)linking the trade with China from human rights issues. It becomes clear that tales of China's political repression and terror have more to do with the political, ideological, and commercial objectives of the Western media (and the national interests that lurk behind) than with what is really happening in China today. Yet, notwithstanding the very real political repression and human rights violations that *do* occur daily in China and that affect its cultural arena and intellectuals, politics now does assume a different function and meaning, which China specialists and the Western media fail to comprehend.

A different model is needed in order to analyze the political mechanism of manipulation, negotiation, diversion, and reconciliation. Chinese society is now replete with tensions and contradictions as a result of its modernization and marketization programs. It is well-known that the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" designates China's peculiar situation of the coexistence of incommensurable forces, of a market-oriented economy and a bureaucracy founded on the past command economy and Maoist ideology. The policy of the post-Mao leadership, headed by Deng Xiaoping, was simply to ban any public debate about issues of political ideology and revolutionary legacy. But silence can hardly dispel the specters of the past that are still very much alive, insofar as the bureaucratic institutions, and the ideological state apparatuses, still hold power. Consequently, post-Mao Chinese leadership has been entrenched in ideological crises ever since "reform and opening-up" campaigns were launched.⁵

In the mid-1990s, however, as the political transition from the post-Mao to the post-Deng eras has gotten well under way, the so-called third generation of post-Deng leaders, headed by Jiang Zemin, has gradually shifted its strategies to focus on the ideological and cultural arenas. By allowing and encouraging China's indigenous popular-culture products,

5. For a discussion of the ideological conflicts in contemporary China, see Liu Kang, "Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China," *boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1995): 193–218.

such as state-sponsored MTV, karaoke concerts, TV soap operas, and kung fu fiction, to prosper and to compete with Western commercial popular culture, the government has effectively ameliorated the tension and conflicts that arise between an increasing mass demand and ideological control. Another powerful strategy is to invoke nationalism. This is achieved either by a revival of Confucian values and ethics, which are said to be beneficial to an East Asian model of modernization, or by a renewed call for patriotism that goes out whenever the Western powers, alarmed by China's rapid economic growth and its increased assertiveness in international affairs, begin to clamor for a new containment strategy in the face of the "Chinese threat." In official announcements and ceremonies, such as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 14th Central Committee's 6th Plenum Resolution on Socialist Spiritual Civilization, or the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Long March, ideological slogans about Marxism and socialism still appear,⁶ but the political agenda in cultural spheres has been shifted decidedly away from idealistic propaganda and toward pragmatic objectives for maintaining order and stability, or the status quo. With the death of Deng Xiaoping, the early days of his rule, when the ideological state apparatuses still had the power to sanctify all the pragmatic measures of reform in economic quarters, have quickly become a memory.

A kind of "postpolitics," with its ideological and idealistic core virtually discarded, is in order now. Chen Xiaoming, a Chinese postmodern critic, defines postpolitics in contemporary Chinese film as a condition in which "everything is political and nothing is political at one and the same time. Politics is everywhere, and yet it subverts itself at any moment."⁷ It is no coincidence that Jiang Zemin, the CCP general secretary, when addressing the 6th National Congress of the Chinese Writers and Artists Association,

6. See "Zhonggong Zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe ruogan zhongyao wenti de jueyi" (CCP Central Committee's resolution on strengthening the construction of socialist spiritual civilization), *Renmin ribao* (People's daily), 14 October 1996, overseas edition. See also the front-page report on the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Long March in *Renmin ribao*, 22 October 1996. Of note in this otherwise routine Chinese-media coverage, which focuses on official celebrations, meetings, and conferences, is the accompanying photo of an art event in the Great Hall of the People, in which gigantic portraits of the three leaders, Mao, Deng, and Jiang, were projected on a huge background screen. The event signaled the complete takeover of Jiang as the third generation political leader.

7. See Chen Xiaoming, "The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese Film," in this issue of *boundary 2*, 124.

made a comment on politics that is remarkably similar to Chen Xiaoming's: "Although we no longer hold that the arts are subject to politics, . . . as Comrade Deng Xiaoping says, 'We of course do not mean to say that politics and arts are separable. Arts and literature cannot be separated from politics.' Politics exists in concrete social life and in the minds and feelings of our culture workers."⁸

The similarity lies primarily in the ambiguity and slippage of the concept of politics itself. Chen Xiaoming sees postpolitics as a "symbolic act" and a largely subversive parody/travesty of the old revolutionary discourse, accomplished by ambiguously displacing political and aesthetic images. Jiang Zemin, on the other hand, while acknowledging the wisdom of relinquishing the political subjugation and policing of all cultural activities, is less ambiguous about the function of cultural politics under the current conditions of "Western economic and technological pressures and ideological penetrations."⁹ Jiang, in fact, hardly worries about bourgeois liberalism and humanism, which were widely espoused by intellectuals in the 1980s. Western-style liberal humanism, being an old foe of the "anti-spiritual pollution" campaigns of 1983 and 1989, has now largely lost its political relevance as an oppositional rallying cry. The rise of commercial popular culture and the government's decree to ban political and ideological discussions have doubly undermined the status and credibility of the intellectual elite, who self-consciously served, in the heyday of the "Great Culture Debates" in the 1980s, as China's "social conscience" and as representatives of political reform. Of course, consumerism itself is discreetly tolerated, if not publicly encouraged, by the authorities to distract the public from political debates. In the 1990s, it is no longer a curious phenomenon that the so-called oppositional intellectual elite joins hands with the government in denouncing the "vulgarization" of culture and the "pollution and corruption of the young mind" by popular culture products. In the meantime, the liberal elite and the government are courting, in their different ways, multinational capitalism's "high" values of the global cultural imaginary, either new Confucianism or new versions of liberal humanism.¹⁰

Popular culture has become a new battleground—one bombarded by heavy artillery. But the battles are fought largely as symbolic acts to

8. Jiang Zemin, "Zai zhongguo wenlian zhongguo zuoxie di 5/6 ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de jianghua" (Speech given at the 5th/6th National Congress of Writers and Artists), *Renmin ribao*, 17 December 1996, 4.

9. Jiang Zemin, "Zai zhongguo," 4.

10. See Liu, "Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization?"

achieve maximum theatrical effect. Wang Shuo, arguably the most popular writer of fiction, film, and TV soap operas in China today, has staged commercial and political controversies about his works and about himself both inside and outside China. "The mocking tone and racy themes of 'hooligan literature' by author Wang Shuo have pushed the censor's limits and made him hugely popular," an Associated Press reporter wrote after a fall 1996 controversy over the author's economic dealings and his new TV scripts.¹¹ The Chinese liberal elite, who invoke either the Frankfurt school notion of reification or Confucian moral didacticism, also deplore Wang Shuo's lack of idealism and ethics. Writers and critics who show sympathy toward Wang Shuo and popular culture trends in general are labeled "amoral opportunists." Some critics, such as Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming, have alluded to postmodern and postcolonial theories in their writings and are therefore sharply rebuffed, along with their imported theories of postmodernism, by the guardians of high cultural values and idealism.¹² Yet, however intensely dramatic, the politics in China's popular culture arena does seem to bear certain postmodern features of decenteredness and indeterminacy, as various political and ideological forces and persuasions engage in a multidirectional war of positions with no ultimate authority or repercussions (the fact that Wang Shuo's fame has increased as a result of his offense to the government attests to the altered rules of the political game). "It all boils down to power struggles," declared a Chinese critic, "power struggles for obtaining symbolic capital."¹³ In other words, the debates and controversies are now translated into fights for the ownership of discourse (*zhengduo huayu quan*) in the cultural and intellectual market. Postpolitics in the present context, according to Chinese critics, is a power struggle without revolutionary ideology as the central locus. It resembles a

11. Associated Press news wire, 27 November 1996. The Voice of America (VOA) also covered the Wang Shuo controversy and related events several times. I was invited by the VOA Chinese program to discuss recent events in contemporary Chinese culture, media, and public opinions, including Wang Shuo's works and their reception in China. The discussion was held 4 November and 1 December 1996. See the VOA Chinese program transcripts, © U.S. Information Agency.

12. See, for instance, recent discussions about postmodernism in China in the Hong Kong journal, *Ershiyi shiji* (Twenty-first century) 27 (Feb. 1995), in which largely liberal critics from China and overseas attack postmodern critics as ultraconservatives who are complicit with the Chinese communist regime.

13. Tao Dongfeng, "Cong wenhua ziben de zhengduo kan zhishi fenzi de fenhua" (Seeing the dissolution of Chinese intellectuals through their contests for cultural capital), *Dongfang* (Orient) 4 (1996): 92.

politics in the Foucauldian sense of having multiple and plural technologies of domination and control such as those that exist in advanced capitalist societies.

But it would be a gross overstatement to say that China has now fully merged with the world-system and thus that its cultural arena has become predominantly postmodern. What is left out in such sweepingly global and globalizing accounts is nothing less than China's own traditions and legacies. In the realm of popular culture, the revolutionary practice and theory of the "culture of the masses" have by no means disappeared. This indigenous tradition has been the cultural dominant, to borrow Raymond Williams's distinction of cultural layers, for nearly half a century. It is still alive and flourishing in terms of its forms, structures, and functions, not to mention its institutions, which remain largely in place. It is true that, on the one hand, the ideological core of revolution has ineluctably lost its grip on the Chinese population and become inexorably "residual."¹⁴ But, on the other hand, deeply embedded in the Chinese political unconscious, revolutionary hegemony still plays a significant role in the overdetermined structural relationships, particularly at discursive and symbolic levels, by which the advocates and opponents of the revolutionary tradition have wrestled to articulate their positions vis-à-vis the revolutionary hegemony. Yet the crucial question remains: How do we interpret these complex layers and modes of cultural production and reproduction that are filled with tension and contradictions?

The Culture of the Masses: The Revolutionary Legacy and Its New Forms

In China today, few, except perhaps a small number of literary historians, are interested in the culture of the masses. Such an interest is, first, politically incorrect: Smacking of Maoist radicalism, the invocation of *qun-zhong wenyi* is suspicious of recalling (if not exorcising) the specters of the Cultural Revolution. But the masses, or China's vast populace, have simply ignored the academic high fashion of political correctness by creatively embracing and transforming the revolutionary tradition and its national and nativist forms and structures. Here, I am referring not only to the popularity of Mao as a new folk icon in today's popular myths and superstitions among

14. For the distinctions between "dominant," "emergent," and "residual" cultures, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Chinese rural populations (and middle-aged or older lower-class urban residents). Insofar as popular culture is predominantly an urban youth cultural phenomenon, it is more instructive to see how, in the contemporary popular culture scene, creativity and imagination emanate from the old collective forms and structures.

Karaoke and the dance party, for instance, are two imported forms of modern popular entertainment—the former being imported from Japan and the latter from Western Europe and Soviet Russia—that were popular in Shanghai during the 1920s and in Yanan during the 1940s. Karaoke, or public “sing-along,” is a collective form of entertainment that is enjoyed throughout China today. Its collectivity has quickly assumed the social function of crossing the boundaries of official (*guanfang*)/unofficial (*minjian*), and public/private. Not only do teenagers, young lovers, and business partners entertain themselves at karaoke bars; it is also customary nowadays for local party committees (which are still the most important power brokers in China's social organizations), trade unions, women's unions, Communist Youth League groups, et cetera, to organize official or semi-official karaoke contests and concerts as holiday celebrations or special occasions.

Dance is another popular activity that merits thorough analysis, though the present essay cannot adequately address it here. Ballroom dance originated in the European aristocracy and became popular in bourgeois salons because of its elegant style and formalities. In China today, it has become perhaps the favorite leisure activity among ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds: For the middle-aged and retired (the latter forming the morning teams that often number in the tens and hundreds), dancing at public parks, playgrounds, and other sports facilities is the best physical exercise, rivaled only by the classical martial arts form of *taijiquan* (*tai-chi*). Ballroom dance parties and sumptuous banquets often follow government-sponsored events, such as certain local and national holiday celebrations, school commencements, and the like, and promote comradeship, good-fellowship, and equality. In addition, these dance parties provide a form of light exercise, both aiding in digestion and encouraging fitness. Through dance parties, then, fun and romance are shared as a communal and collective experience. (However, some would link the increase in extramarital affairs, the divorce rate, and sex scandals to dance parties.)

The history of ballroom dance in China is ambiguous. It can be traced back to the Yan'an years of revolution in the 1940s. The communists, including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, were avid Soviet-style ballroom dancers in Yan'an. After the revolution, the tradition continued in the cities

and was made popular among the masses, mostly among young factory workers and college students. The large dance parties, organized by the Communist Youth League in the 1950s and early 1960s, always emphasized the collective spirit of the revolutionary years. During the Cultural Revolution, however, ballroom dances were replaced by large group dances that displayed loyalty to the Great Leader, and European and Soviet music that had accompanied the earlier dance parties disappeared altogether. These "loyalty dances" were eventually performed to the accompaniment of Yan'an folk dances called *yangge*, or rice-sprout songs, which were played by peasants to celebrate labor and the harvest. In addition to the revolutionary tradition, there is, of course, another side to the story of the dance party. When held in the dimly lit European-style pubs in Shanghai and accompanied by live dance bands, the well-dressed, but by now gray-haired, couples, long-retired employees of Western firms established in the 1940s, could indulge in nostalgia for the bygone days of Shanghai's colonial glory and decadence. Shanghai is the "authentic origin" of China's Western-style cultural life, and even Yan'an revolutionaries such as Mao could not help but submit to the alluring temptations of this style, which was embodied by none other than his mistress-turned-wife, Jiang Qing, who was a third-rate film star in Shanghai during the 1930s. Jiang Qing and other women like her, on arriving in Yan'an, the Holy Land of revolution, quickly found that Western bourgeois styles and pastimes such as ballroom dance could be readily modified and incorporated into the revolutionary culture, in the name of internationalism, following the Soviet models.

Revolution transformed the Chinese appropriation of Western bourgeois and aristocratic culture into popular forms but failed to resolve the historical ambiguities and contradictions. In the 1990s, collective and public forms of entertainment, such as karaoke and dance parties, have been rejuvenated. Although the new experience is generally devoid of any revolutionary spirit and is largely nurtured in the cultural ambience of consumerism, collectivity, at least as a formal feature, still imparts a cohesiveness to the population. To understand the persistence of the collective spirit not merely as a residual force but as something dynamic in China today, notwithstanding all the contradictions it entails, it is necessary to go back to the historical formation of the practice and theory of the culture of the masses.

Culture has been the core of the Chinese Revolution, which started in urban centers such as Shanghai and Beijing. Rather than being called forth by a powerful proletariat prompted by capitalist economic crises, as prescribed by the classical Marxist theory of revolution, the Chinese Revo-

lution was first promulgated by the radical intelligentsia of the May Fourth period (1919–1927), who were inspired by Western ideas and by Marxism in particular. But the failure of communist urban insurgencies necessitated a decisive strategic shift from the cities to the rural areas as the site of revolution and resistance, and the key issue confronting the revolution, as Arif Dirlik points out, was how to translate Marxism, an urban-centered and Eurocentric theory of revolution, into native and vernacular strategies for everyday practice.¹⁵ Drawing on Dirlik's indispensable insights into Mao's sinification or vernacularization of Marxism, I have further observed that central to Mao's project was an *aesthetic* concept of "national form": Mao's solution was to endow urban, cosmopolitan, and foreign thought—classical Marxism—with a national form bearing primarily aesthetic and artistic features.¹⁶ In Mao's view, the "sinification of Marxism" entailed a replacement of "foreign stereotypes," "vacuous and abstract tunes," and "dogmatism" with "the refreshing, lively Chinese styles and tunes that are palatable to the tastes and ears of the common folks of China."¹⁷ Mao's rhetoric about arts was not merely metaphorical. It can be argued that cultural and aesthetic forms and their transformation lay at the heart of Mao Zedong's revolutionary vision, in which the establishment of revolutionary hegemony was given the highest priority. In other words, the question of cultural and aesthetic formation (national form) was elevated to the center of Mao's revolutionary strategy for creating a Chinese Marxism that would instill in the peasants a revolutionary consciousness and mobilize them in the revolutionary struggle.

The concept of the culture of the masses was first conceived by Qu Qiubai, an early leader of the CCP and China's leading Marxist literary theorist. A major figure in the post-May Fourth urban New Culture Movement, which paved the way for the Chinese Communist Revolution, Qu sharply critiqued the Europeanizing and bourgeois tendencies of the May Fourth Movement. In the wake of the failed urban proletarian insurrections,

15. See Arif Dirlik, "Mao Zedong and 'Chinese Marxism,'" in *The Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam (London: Routledge, 1997), 593–619.

16. For further discussion, see Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

17. Mao Zedong, "Lun xin jieduan" (On the new period), in *Mao Zedong ji* (Collected works of Mao Zedong), ed. Takeuchi Minoru, vol. 6 (Hong Kong: Po Wen Book Co., 1976), 260–61. For an English translation of the text (in a different, heavily edited version), see *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 2 (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1970), 209–10.

for which he was directly responsible, Qu believed that the urban Marxist intellectuals and the peasantry would have to be brought together to form one revolutionary force. To accomplish this, Qu proposed to wage a “mass cultural revolution” (*dazhong wenhua geming*) as “the concrete task of seeking the leadership in cultural revolution.”¹⁸ After being ousted from the CCP leadership in 1931 as a result of the debacle of the urban communist uprisings, Qu first devoted his energy in Shanghai to the theoretical study of Marxism and, together with his closest friend, Lu Xun, China’s modern literary giant, to the urban proletarian literary movement. Then, from 1933 to 1934, Qu Qiubai went to Jiangxi, the impoverished, backward, rural revolutionary base-area, where he launched the famous rural cultural revolution and education movement. The main objective of this movement was to create a popular national vernacular language by drawing on traditional aesthetic forms and literary discourses, such as the folk arts of storytelling, puppet theater, folklore, local operas, et cetera, which had been excluded from the canon of the national cultural tradition by the ruling classes and the aristocratic elite.¹⁹

During the Yan’an years of the 1940s, Mao finally set up the culture of the masses as an integral component of the Chinese Revolution and of Chinese Marxism. “Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people,” Mao proclaimed. “It prepares the ground ideologically before the revolution comes and is an important, indeed essential, fighting front in the general revolutionary front during the revolution.”²⁰ “Revolutionary culture,” or the “culture of the masses,” was further codified in Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art* (1942). This canonical text defined the audience and subject matter of cultural representation as essentially the peasant population, while urban intellectuals and their pioneering work in the revolutionary hegemony were downgraded and even harshly denigrated. Consequently, the legacy of the urban cultural revolution, an essential component of the Chinese Revolution, became a negative element in Mao’s new version of the culture of the

18. Editorial Committee of the Collected Works of Qu Qiubai, *Qu Qiubai wenji* (Collected essays of Qu Qiubai), vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1955), 880.

19. See *Qu Qiubai wenji*, 913. For a study of the cultural popularization movement in modern China, see Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1985).

20. *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 308.

masses, which was grounded on dichotomies between the rural masses and the urban bourgeois or petit-bourgeois intellectuals. Urban intellectuals were subjected to endless “thought reform” and “remolding” after the publication of the *Yan'an Talks*. After the CCP's seizure of state power, urban and cosmopolitan social reconstruction became the central task of the revolution. However, contrary to Mao's numerous promises and strategic blueprints for building a “new democratic culture,” whereby a pluralistic amalgamation of diverse cultural forms would constitute a new social space or hegemony, Mao reasserted, and increasingly intensified, an instrumentalist and manipulative cultural policy that stifled, rather than encouraged, cultural diversity and plurality. Under these circumstances, the crude peasant and native folk cultural forms were valorized and elevated to the apex of revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism, and urban, cosmopolitan literary and aesthetic discourses, forms, and structures were subjected to incessant assaults as bourgeois, imperialist, and colonialist cultural remnants.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a paradoxical culmination of the Maoist populist mass democracy and mass culture movement and of widespread political repression and terrorism. On the one hand, one witnessed a collective, carnivalesque atmosphere of singing and dancing. Hundreds of millions of people of all ages danced loyalty dances to the Great Leader in public squares daily during the Cultural Revolution, and it is this atmosphere that is curiously recaptured in the present-day ballroom dances held in public parks and streets and in the karaoke parties and contests. But in “serious” representations of the era, this festive mood has all but disappeared, except in absolutely negative terms. Take, for example, the film *Blue Kite* (1993), directed by Chen Kaige, a Fifth Generation director whose credits also include such international festival films as *Farewell My Concubine*. The film's dominant metaphor is a solitary blue kite flying languidly against a gloomy sky, portraying symbolically the sullen banality and horror of everyday life, as viewed and narrated by the child protagonist. Even the more upbeat comedy *Yangguang canlan de rizi*, adapted from Wang Shuo's novel and directed by Jiang Wen, a much younger, Sixth Generation filmmaker, had to underplay its negative message in order to win Taiwan's Film Festival Awards.²¹ The movie recaptures the libidinous impulses and merrymaking of a group of carefree adolescents and juvenile delinquents during the Cultural Revolution. But

21. Associated Press news wire, 22 December 1996.

rather than translating the Chinese title more literally, as *Bright Sunny Days*, which would have been faithful to the texture of the film, the producers translated the title as *In the Heat of the Sun*, alluding obviously to the recent Oscar-winning Russian film *Burnt by the Sun*, which portrays Stalin's reign of terror through the eyes of a schoolboy. (It is no coincidence that a similar narrative perspective—of an innocent, docile child—is used by Chen Kaige in *Blue Kite*.) The amusing experiences of the teenage protagonists in Jiang Wen's film become subtly transfigured in the English title into a suggestion of torment under the blazing heat of the sun.

The darker, more tragic aspects of the era, on the other hand, were also represented by the endless spectacles of parades, mass rallies, and presentations of the eight model revolutionary operas devised by Jiang Qing, the so-called great banner holder of the literary revolution. These revolutionary operas, which blended the styles and structures of traditional Peking opera with the European high-cultural forms of ballet and the symphony orchestra, were at once burlesquely avant-garde and anachronistically neoclassical. These contradictory features were well demonstrated in the recent restagings of these operas both in China and overseas. During a 1996 North American tour, the China Central Ballet repeatedly performed *The Red Detachment of Women* as its grand finale, which caused post-modern audiences in Los Angeles and New York to marvel at the opera's innovative multipositionality and hybridity, in which revolutionary ideologies, exotic nativist music and dances of the *Li* ethnic minority on Hainan Island, and high European styles and modalities coalesce in a neo-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But the political references, embodied in the rigidly designated and stylized neoclassical types, which were once deeply ingrained in the social consciousness and practice of everyday life, have been almost completely effaced in the recent restagings of these operas for profit. However, their political rancor and deconstructive predilection can hardly be concealed or exonerated, even though the present entertainment industry may indeed be able to customize them so as to satisfy today's voracious market demand for cultural diversity. Above all, the contradictions shown in today's commercial popular culture have long been embedded in earlier forms of the culture of the masses and have only become more intensified at the present historical conjuncture.

The Culture Industry and Hegemony: Critical Models Revisited

To account for the transformations, as well as the persistence, of the revolutionary legacy of the culture of the masses, some methodological and epistemological difficulties have first to be considered. The critical models of the Frankfurt school's theory of culture industry and of Gramscian hegemony remain powerful despite the general tendency to discredit Marxism throughout the world. As capitalist globalization in the post-cold war era claims the end of history with self-complacency and self-assurance, the assumptions that Adorno made about the durability of modern capitalism seem more relevant than ever. The secret of the self-regeneration of capitalism, according to the Frankfurt school, rests on affluence and consumerism, and on effective forms of social control, which are imposed by the combined forces of state and civil society. The Gramscian notion of hegemony, on the other hand, offers a broader spectrum of spices and a more refined assortment of ingredients in the intellectual (and popular) kitchens of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. But the strategies of nonsystematic, nontotalizing post-Marxism, of micropolitics, identity politics, or politics of difference, are viable only by way of a double displacement of Gramsci's fundamental principles. First, Gramsci's tactic of socialist revolution, the core of his theoretical thinking, is displaced in much of contemporary cultural studies, which is obsessed with *discourses* on gender, race, and ethnicity, by issues related primarily to language and sexuality. Second, Gramsci's notion of the interregnum is now taken for granted, not as a transitional historical interlude but as a condition of existence with no foreseeable future of fundamental transformation, thus deferring or postponing indefinitely the agenda of social change.

However, it would be misleading to presume that popular culture in China falls seamlessly under the hegemony of global capitalism's cultural imaginary. As I have tried to demonstrate in this essay, in the domain of popular culture, the revolutionary legacy of the culture of the masses, together with the legacy of China's own folk traditions and customs, constitutes a distinctively different site and space, one whose position in the global geopolitical order or world-system has yet to be fully worked out. The dilemma of critical models of popular culture within the Western context is further complicated by China's legacies.

In view of China's rapid development as a society of affluence and commercialism, which is manifested in commercial popular cultural productions, Adorno's observation about the mechanism of capitalism at work

in mass culture is probably closest to the truth: "The real secret of success . . . is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert."²² This classical concept of reification or commodity fetishism needs little qualification when used to describe what happens in China's popular culture market and, indeed, in the social consciousness of the country today, where money and capital were once denounced and nearly abolished during the height of the Cultural Revolution. One could argue, too, that reification occurs precisely in the formation of the dominant ideology as "false consciousness," which, ironically, in China's case, is nothing less than Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic "socialism with Chinese characteristics." "To get rich is glorious," Deng declared. In the wake of his death, his predecessors have been wrestling with the quite unpleasant, but compelling, problems of his legacy: the mounting tension and contradictions between the more affluent coastal urban areas and the still-impoverished vast rural hinterland; the widening economic and social gaps among the working class, the poor peasants, and the newly rich; and the rising gender and ethnic inequalities and conflicts.

Having in mind the historic dialectic of contemporary China in terms of both its rapid modernization and its social problems, one may better understand the curious twists and turns in the ideological formations at issue here. While Adorno sees deceptive individuality manufactured by a standardized process of production as the ideological hallmark of the culture industry, Chinese ideology valorizes the *collective*, rather than the individual, as the very locus of material affluence and prosperity. If, following Adorno's logic of argument but modifying his cultural elitism, there is a utopian moment to be recuperated in the reified capitalist mass culture, it would be, as Fredric Jameson puts it, a cultural production that "can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world-system, black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, . . . the literature of the Third World."²³ But Jameson immediately qualifies such a utopian cultural production by dictating that it "is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system."²⁴ However, as Jameson has repeatedly argued

22. Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 34.

23. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1990), 23.

24. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 24.

about the postmodern late capitalism and globalization that colonizes the last uncontaminated cultural experiences of the Third World, as well as the realms of the unconscious and the aesthetic, such a utopian possibility has become exceedingly remote.

But what if the *collective* experience itself, as the Chinese case indicates, is fully consistent with the logic of capitalism? What would happen when a collective, or, indeed, a *national*, will sets itself squarely on a trajectory toward a capitalist market and commodity system? In its lived experience of the regime's ideology of market socialism, with all its contradictoriness and inconsistencies, the collectivity may actually legitimize the current moves of the regime. But such an ideological legitimization cannot guarantee any coherence between market and socialism; rather, it only reveals the deep-seated problems inherent in China's course of revolution and modernity.

Mao's legacy was inherited and at the same time metamorphosed by Deng. The promises and failures of Mao, however, cannot be adequately comprehended without looking at his complex historical endeavor of creating an alternative modernity through political, ideological, and cultural revolutions. In this respect, the Gramscian model of hegemony can be very useful. I have discussed elsewhere the correlation of hegemony and cultural revolution by comparing Gramsci and the Chinese Marxists, from Qu Qiubai to Mao and Hu Feng.²⁵ Suffice it to say that the Chinese Revolution greatly resembles Gramsci's vision, especially in terms of constructing a socialist hegemony or a leadership in cultural spheres. The Chinese experience in both the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods, on the other hand, problematizes hegemony and cultural revolution as strategies to oppose capitalist modernity or globalization.

An important lesson to learn in the present context of popular culture is how to rethink a cultural space in a postrevolutionary society, which is characterized by plurality and diversity of forms, structures, and institutions, rather than by monolithic state control and manipulation. What Gramsci envisioned in the fascist prison is *not* the bourgeois civil society in the advanced capitalist West as such, but a visionary and, indeed, utopian

25. Liu Kang, "Hegemony and Cultural Revolution," *New Literary History* 28, no. 7 (1997): 69–86. For earlier discussions of the relationship between Gramsci and Mao, see Arif Dirlik, "The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci, and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory," *Modern China* 9, no. 2 (Apr. 1983): 182–211. Also see Nigel Todd, "Ideological Superstructure in Gramsci and Mao Tse-tung," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (Jan./Mar. 1974).

future of socialism, whereby the democratic civil society and the state interpenetrate and are interdependent. Gramsci remained ambivalent and often contradictory on the actual formation of such a future state, where the relationship between civil society and the revolutionary party and state is of central importance.

But in Mao's valorization of the rural, nativist, and national-popular culture of the masses, the urban culture was viewed as exclusively bourgeois and had to be completely rejected and transcended by incessant cultural revolutions. Mao adopted a hegemonic strategy that combined coercion and manipulation by the state with gaining the broadest consent of the masses through ideological self-study and thought reform. Mao's hegemony proved to be enormously effective during most of his reign, despite the fact that these coercive, manipulative, and instrumentalizing measures increasingly dominated China's cultural arena, and during the Cultural Revolution, the masses were largely manipulated by Mao and his radical cohorts, and the situation degenerated into a virtual reign of mob terror.

During the Cultural Revolution, the subaltern classes, or "the workers and poor peasants," in Mao's parlance, were mobilized precisely by the tactics and strategies that Gramsci and Mao envisioned. There were many examples of the flexible "wars of position," such as the Red Guards assaulting state cultural institutions and establishments. And there was no lack of subversive multipositionalities, such as the so-called worker-peasant-soldier college students who switched roles with professors and university administrators to educate, administer, and transform so-called bourgeois educational institutions. In literary discourse and the arts, discursive hybridities were glorified as the best accomplishments of the subaltern classes, who became the masters of experimental plays, poetry, dance, and painting, all of which blended native and ethnic arts, rural folklore, the European high-art forms of ballet, symphony, piano concerto, and oil painting, and the Stalinist neoclassical styles of pomposity and pretentiousness.

Again, these concrete, historical practices were built into the structures of the culture of the masses, giving rise to contradictory impulses and orientations. Mao's hegemony of the culture of the masses, however, always valorized culture and cultural revolution in his vision of an alternative modernity. When Mao's repressive hand was in firm control, these contradictions were overshadowed by the overarching theme of class struggle. But during Deng's era of reform, a Pandora's box was opened. Deng's socialism with Chinese characteristics bears all the contradictions of Mao's vision of alter-

native modernity, except for Mao's emphases on class struggle and cultural revolution. Hence, the contradictions inherent in Mao's hegemony of the culture of the masses exploded and sank into the newly risen commercial popular culture in Deng's market-driven economic reform and modernization campaigns. The question we must now ask is: What happens when the revolutionary hegemony is replaced by capitalist hegemony, namely the commercial popular culture of today?

The Issues of the Everyday: A Site of Critique and Reconstruction

Ultimately, we must return to the most basic level of everyday life to search for answers to those questions that have been conceived in the past primarily under the rubrics of metanarratives such as revolution, capitalism, and hegemony. The everyday is of critical significance insofar as popular culture, or the culture of the masses, deals precisely with the issues of the everyday life of the populace, not only in terms of their leisure activities, entertainment, and cultural life but in terms of the most elemental, the most minute routines in life, namely, eating, drinking, sleeping, working, traveling, resting, et cetera.

The everyday is crucially related to the larger issue of cultural and social criticism, particularly the global/local correlation, in contemporary capitalist cultural production. As Henri Lefebvre defines it, "the everyday is a *product*, the most general of products in an era where production engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers. . . . The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden."²⁶ Lefebvre understands this, of course, to be a condition of existence in a capitalist society, and he goes on to say, "The everyday is covered by a surface: modernity."²⁷ I want to add that the everyday is not only both global and local (in the sense that it must encompass different temporalities, subjectivities, spaces, and public spheres); it may also serve as a site that critiques the contradictions and fallacies of the present, and that provides a space for imagining and practicing cultural transformation and reconstruction.

Conceived in this way, the everyday may unravel the promises and

26. Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 9.

27. Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," 10.

failures of Mao's culture of the masses. Mao's national form, or the culture of the masses, as we know, was conceived primarily at the everyday level, too, precisely as a counterhegemonic formation to Western bourgeois, imperialist, and colonialist hegemony. Mao's strategy was to emphasize the concrete, the material, and even the bodily functions, forms, and structures of the everyday, which were rooted in the textures, temporalities, and rhythms of Chinese peasant life, "the refreshing, lively Chinese styles and tunes that are palatable to the tastes and ears of the common folks of China."

The utopian vision and promises of Mao's culture of the masses were concrete, material ones that appealed to the sensuous desires of the populace. The vision, in its simplest and crudest form, was a promise of land to the tillers. Such an ideology of "land to the owners," however, was not intended to reproduce the idyllic harmony of the precapitalist, agrarian mode of production. On the contrary, it was formulated as a more advanced, progressive stage that transcended not only the agrarian, "feudalist" mode of production but also the modern capitalist mode of production. It is true that such a utopianism is still deeply ingrained in the teleological thinking about modernization and modernity that is epitomized by Marxism. But Mao's utopianism succeeded because of his ability to translate the teleological concepts of history and utopian future into concrete scenes and images of the everyday (the images of the happy life on a Soviet collective farm portrayed by the Russian media contributed in no small part to such a utopian vision for the Chinese peasant population).²⁸

But where Mao succeeded is also where his vision blurred. This is not to say that Mao failed to deliver on his promises after the revolution was won; the peasants *did* get their share of land, and millions of Chinese people were encouraged by Mao's plan for social and economic reconstruction, and were dedicated to the course of transforming China into a materially and economically prosperous society with justice, equality, and democracy.

However, after the city (rather than the countryside) again became the locus of social life after the establishment of the revolutionary regime, the vision of the everyday in Mao's culture of the masses failed to provide a stabilizing and enduring point of reference for "everydayness," that is, the tangible, the concrete, and the countless individual routine activities—

28. For a discussion of Mao's utopianism, see Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

eating, dressing, sleeping, working, lovemaking, et cetera—in a vastly complicated and diverse urban environment. Instead, the everyday was constantly transformed into spectacles of the noneveryday—stories of violence, death, catastrophe, revolutionary martyrs, and counterrevolutionary villains and enemies abounded. In other words, the ideological state apparatuses projected, or interpellated, in Althusserian parlance, the subjectivities of ordinary citizens by way of noneveryday political and social events, in the aesthetic forms and styles of the political sublime. The everyday was deprived of its everydayness. The failure of the culture of the masses, in sum, lay in its political instrumentalization and manipulation, which imposed on the populace from above social meanings, normality, and conformity, but these cultural products could barely meet their needs and desires.

In contrast to Mao's culture of the masses, the contemporary culture industry, or the commercial popular culture, succeeds precisely by affirming the social relevance of everyday life despite its overt objectives of making profit or inspiring commodity fetishism. Commercial popular culture today is, by and large, a "joint venture" between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. According to Michel de Certeau, popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides.²⁹ The "system" refers to the social space in contemporary capitalist societies in which the populace has enough room and the ability to creatively maneuver the cultural products in order to satisfy their everyday needs and pleasures.

It seems that the contemporary Chinese culture of the everyday has increasingly become the site of dialogical contention of a variety of forces, among which the culture industry, or the commercial popular culture, and China's local and national forms and styles, including the revolutionary legacy of the culture of the masses, intersect and interpenetrate. The sudden emergence of attractive shopping malls, the giant commercial posters of multinational corporations such as Sony and Nike, karaoke, MTV, and ballroom dance parties, along with imported (or pirated) Hollywood big-budget action movies, and CDs, all seem to validate Certeau's overly optimistic, and populist, hypothesis of "making do" with diverse cultural products within the system. However, everyday life under such circumstances

29. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). For a "liberal-populist" view of popular culture that draws on Certeau, see John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989). For a critique of such views, see Ien Ang, "Culture and Communication: Towards an Ethnographic Critique of Media Consumption in the Transnational Media System," in *What Is Cultural Studies?* ed. John Storey (London: Arnold, 1996), 237–54.

may reveal the degree to which the human psyche bears the irrationality and contradictions of a crazed “gold rush with Chinese characteristics” in the age of global capitalism. The specificities of the Chinese everyday and its “systems,” particularly the tension and contradictions inherent in China’s popular culture domain, have to be fully analyzed in order to begin a much needed project of cultural reconstruction.

Such a project of reconstruction cannot, however, build on the fantastic spectacle provided by the global cultural imaginary of transnational capitalism, for the libidinous wish fulfillment underlying such a spectacle functions as a displacement of the genuine satisfaction of the everyday with the glamorous but illusory vision of fortune making, or *fa cai*. As the global cultural imaginary and its local and nativist incarnations of the “Asia-Pacific Age of Fortunes” sweep across Asia, East Asia, China, and the whole world, popular culture and the everyday must bring the dual function of critique and reconstruction to bear on their material practices as well as their theoretical inquiries. The historical dialectics and contradictions in the Chinese legacy of the culture of the masses will not lose their relevance in the foreseeable future. What remains to be seen is whether the dialectics of history can turn these cultural contradictions into something constructive and creative; failing that, history itself will be a casualty of a cultural situation that offers no alternative to a reified pleasure principle.